

Does Tourism Promote Peaceful Coexistence?

Tourism professionals and tourism scholars have long grappled with the question if tourism promotes peace. Certainly this is a concept that tourism industry professionals want to believe. Yet, the answer to this intellectual query is not cut and dry.



The basic assumption of those who see tourism as a peace generator is that tourism allows people to know each other, to work with each other, and to learn to appreciate each other's cultures and by so doing come to appreciate each other. Tourism then is a giant "communication generator" that allow mutual understanding and therefore appreciation of the other. Thus, in 1988 Louis d'Amour called tourism "the world's peace industry". Others, including academics agree. Thus, Levy and Hawkins in 2008 wrote in an article entitled: "Peace Through Tourism: Commerce Based Principles and Practices" and stated that: "a positive framework of peace can include influences such as transparency, material well being, culture and education". Is this assumption true, or do we need to question these concepts a bit further?

Can we argue that the idea that tourism promotes peace should not be taken as axiomatic, but rather as a hypothesis that needs to be studied? Mistakes can be costly, and can produce multiple negative results. For example, many criminologists believe that poverty produces crime, yet the data seem to contradict this belief and policies based on this hypothesis have failed. In the same way is the jury still out as to whether tourism does or does not promote peace?



To make this assumption even more difficult there is no one standard definition of tourism. Many people mean different things when they say tourism, and there are multiple forms of tourism ranging from family vacations to business trips, from sun and surf vacations to visits to poverty and disaster sites. In a like manner there is no one definition of “peace.” When we use the word peace, do we define it: as the absence of war, or the absence of violence, or do we define peace as mutual understanding and a sense of appreciation of the other? Is peace through tourism defined as a lack of hostilities between nations or do we define tourism peace as the ability to live or visit a place without undue probabilities that the resident or visitor will be physically harmed?

These are major questions. If we mean to state that nations that engage in tourism interchanges never enter into war, then it is not hard to find multiple counter examples to this hypothesis. In fact, most nations that have gone to war have had tourism interchanges before entering into hostilities. In a like manner, there are a number of nations around the world which are technically “at peace” but within whose borders there is a great deal of hostility and violence. Can we relate physical criminal acts with the lack of peace? Lastly there is the issue of civil wars. Clearly there are many situations in which the citizens of the same country know each other, have shared a great deal of commonality and most likely have had internal tourism, but for other reasons have chosen to go to war. Do we need to ask in these situations, why did tourism not prevent war?

Just as there is no one definition of peace, so the tourism literature is not absolutely one sided when it comes to the question of tourism promoting peace. For example in their article, Tomljenovic, R. and Faulkner B. (2000) noted:

an increase in such (tourism) contacts may intensify and perpetuate misconceptions about foreigners; the presentation of tourism as a 'peace industry' is a ploy to disguise its true impact; the proposition that travel improves understanding is a Western, rather than universal perception; and attitude change at the individual level has little impact on policy development at the national level.

Furthermore, most tourism professionals know that there is a great deal of tourism that is not an in-depth experience, but from a cultural or personal interchange perspective superficial. To complicate the issue still further there is also the class difference between many tourists and the tourist providers. This class differentiation between the tourism consumer and the tourism provider is especially true in cases of tourism from the developed world to underdeveloped world.



Not all tourism is “good tourism”. Thus, many of the Caribbean islands and some Southeastern Asian nations have had to deal with the issue of sex tourism or even worse child sex tourism. In those cases, we may expect that the “cultural interchange” was anything but positive. Much to the contrary, it may be possible to hypothesize that the greater the numbers of tourists who come to these underdeveloped lands, the higher the resentment factor and the less likely that feelings of comradery develop. Finally, it is highly imaginable that in places where customer service is lacking, where visitors may be subject to becoming crime victims, and where visitors may prey on locals, that the interchange between cultures may be far from positive.

The data then seem to be far from conclusive. We can find many examples where tourists and locals have shared very positive experiences, but we can also find counter examples where exposure to another culture, especially when it goes against the tourist’s cultural or moral principles produces negative intercultural feelings rather than positive ones. An example of the latter is bullfighting. A visit to a bullfight may produce a better understanding of Spanish culture or it may simply reinforce negative feelings toward Spanish culture.

Here are some ideas to help use your tourism product as a peacemaker rather than as a hostility/resentment producer:

Make sure that your community is as safe and secure as possible. While no one can guarantee 100% security, the safer your community, the higher the probability that the visitor will not have a

negative experience. Be true to yourself and be the best that you can be. Know that you are different from your visitors. If you were the same they would most likely not come, so promote who you are and be proud of your own culture. Never try to be what you are not. Stress customer service. Some things are universal, for example showing that people care, smiling and a sense of compassion are universal concepts that can win lots of friends. Know your community's own strengths and weaknesses. Not every tourism site will appeal to every visitor. Niche market, go after those people who will most benefit from what your locale has to offer. Focus on the individual. You are not responsible for national policy, for international terrorism or economic disagreements. Instead build relationships on a one-by-one basis. It is not clear if tourism actually generates peace or not, but what is clear is that providing a safe, clean and caring locale makes life a whole lot nicer not only for visitors but also for the local residents.

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Date: 2011-04-25

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-tourism-as-a-peace-promoter-article1510>